

SKETCHES FROM EASTERN HISTORY

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V.

A SERVILE WAR IN THE EAST.

IMMEDIATELY after the tragic night in which the Caliph Mutawakkil was murdered at the instigation of his own son (11th or 12th December 861), the proud fabric of the Abbásid empire—already greatly shaken—began to collapse. The troops, Turkish and others, raised and deposed the Caliphs; the generals, for the most part quondam slaves, like those whom they commanded, strove for a mastery which in turn was often dependent on the humours of the soldiery. In the provinces new rulers arose, who did not always think it necessary to acknowledge the Caliph as lord, even in name. Claimants belonging to the house of Alí had success in some places. In the great towns of the Tigris region there were serious popular tumults. Peace and security were enjoyed only in those districts where a governor, practically independent, held firm and strict rule.

This circumstance alone makes it in some degree intelligible how a clever and unscrupulous adventurer, leaning for support on the most despised class of the population, should have been able, not far from the heart of the empire, to set up a rule which for a long time was the terror of the surrounding regions, and only yielded at last, after nearly fourteen years of effort on the part of the caliphate, which had in the meanwhile recovered a little of its former strength.

Alí, son of Mohammed, a native of the large village of Verzenín, not far from the modern Teherán, gave himself out to be a descendant of Alí and of his wife Fátima, the daughter

of the Prophet. The claim may have been just; the descendants of Alí by that time were reckoned by thousands, and were very far from being, all of them, persons of distinction. It is, of course, equally possible that his alleged descent was a mere invention. According to some authorities his family belonged to Bahrein, a district of north-eastern Arabia, and was a branch of the tribe of Abdalkais, which had its seat there. In any case, he passed for a man of Arab blood. Before he became known to the world, Alí is said, among other adventures, to have gone about for a while in Bahrein, seeking a following there. This statement is made extremely probable by the fact that several of his principal followers belonged to that district, though it is far removed from the world's highways, and but seldom mentioned in history; among these was the black freedman, Sulaimán, son of Jāmi, one of his most capable generals. The ambitious Alí, utilising the prevailing anarchy, next sought to secure a footing in Basra. This great commercial city, next to Bagdad the most important place in the central provinces, was suffering much at that time from the conflicts of two parties, to all appearance the inhabitants of two different quarters of the town.¹ Yet Alí gained little here; some of his followers, and even the members of his own family, were thrown into prison, a lot which he himself escaped only by flight to Bagdad. But soon afterwards, in connection with a change of governor, new disturbances broke out in Basra, the prisons were broken, and Alí was soon again on the spot. He had already thoroughly surveyed the ground for his plans. X

We are very imperfectly acquainted with the scene of the occurrences which I am about to relate. Even if the modern condition of these parts admitted of being represented on maps much more closely than defective surveys allow, and

¹ Enmity of this kind between two quarters or guilds is nothing unusual in Arab towns.

were the surveys better, they would not help us very much, for the whole face of the land has greatly changed since the times we write of. At that time the Euphrates in the lowest part of its course discharged itself into a region of lake and marsh, connected with the sea by a number of tidal channels. The most important of these waters was near Basra, which lay farther to the west than the modern much smaller city of the same name (Bussorah). That place and its immediate neighbourhood was intersected by innumerable canals (more than 120,000, it is asserted). The chief arm of the Tigris was at that time the southward flowing, now called Shatt al Hai, upon which stood the city of Wásit. Farther down, the stream must have turned towards the south-east. The present main arm, whose main course is to the south-east, was at that time dry, or had a very limited volume of water. The lowest part of the Tigris was connected with the stream on which Basra stood by numerous canals, some of them navigable to large sea-going ships. All these waters were reached by the tide. Floods and broken embankments had even by that time converted much arable land into marshes; while, on the other hand, by drainage and embanking, many pieces of land had been reclaimed. Since that time, in common with all the rest of Irák (Babylonia), this southern portion, in a very conspicuous degree, has been so grievously wasted and neglected, that the forces of nature have entirely gained the upper hand. What was a smiling country has been turned into a wilderness by the spread of the marshes, or by the silting up and stoppage of the drainage channels. The rivers have in part quite changed their beds. On this account we can follow only in a vague way the very precise topographical details which our sources give in describing the campaigns against Alí and his bands.

At no great distance eastward from Basra there were

extensive flats, traversed by ditches, in which great numbers of black slaves, mostly from the east coast of Africa, the land of the Zenj,¹ were employed by rich *entrepreneurs* of the city in digging away the nitrous surface soil, so as to lay bare the fruitful ground underneath, and at the same time to obtain the saltpetre that occurred in the upper stratum. An industry of such magnitude in the open country is seldom met with in the East. The work in such a case is very hard, and the supervision must be strict. The feeling of affection which in the East binds the slave very closely to the family in which he lives and has grown up, is here altogether wanting. On the other hand, among such masses of slaves working together there easily springs up a certain community of feeling, a common sense of embitterment against their masters, and, under favourable circumstances, a consciousness of their own strength; thus are combined the conditions of a powerful insurrection. So it was in the servile wars of the last century of the Roman republic, and so it was here. Alí recognised the strength latent in those black slaves. The fact that he was able to set this strength in motion, and that he developed it into a terrible power which required long time and the very greatest exertions to overcome it, conclusively shows that he was a man of genius. The "leader of the Zenj," the "Alid," or the "false Alid," plays a very great part in the annals of his time—such a part, indeed, that it is easy to understand why our main informant, Tabarí, should by preference call him "the abominable one," "the wicked one," or "the traitor."

Once before in Babylonia a talented and unscrupulous Arab had utilised a time of internal confusion to raise a sovereignty on religious pretexts by the aid of a despised class; the cunning Mokhtár had appealed to the Persian or half-Persian population of the great cities, particularly

¹ Properly Zeng, hence Zangebar (corrupted into Zanzibar).

Cufa, upon whom the dominant Arabs in those early days of Islam looked down with supreme contempt (685–687 A.D.). But our hero went much deeper, and maintained himself much longer, than Mokhtár.

Before openly declaring himself, Alí had sought out from among the lowest strata of the population, and the freedmen in particular, suitable tools for the execution of his plans. In the beginning of September 869 he betook himself, at first under the guise of business agent for a princely family, to the saltpetre district, and began at once to rouse the slaves. Saturday, 10th September 869, is reckoned as the date at which he openly declared himself. He represented to the negro slaves how badly they were being treated, and promised them, if they joined him, freedom, wealth, and—slaves. In other words, he did not preach universal equality and well-being, but reserved the supremacy for the particular class to which he addressed himself. All this, of course, was clothed in religious forms. He proclaimed the restoration of true legality. None but those who followed himself were believers, or entitled to claim the heavenly and earthly rights of the true Moslem. Alí thus appealed at once to the nobler and to the more vulgar feelings of the rudest masses, and with complete success. We may accept the statement that he gave himself out for inspired; at any rate to the blacks he seemed to be a messenger of God. That he himself believed in his own heavenly vocation is hardly to be assumed; all that we know of him bespeaks a very cool understanding. We learn much more, it is true, about his warlike deeds than about his true character; religious fancy has often great influence even upon coolly calculating natures, and in the East especially it is very difficult to draw the line between self-deception and imposition upon others. That Alí was sincere when he betook himself to astrology in important crises need not

be doubted, for this superstition at that time held sway over even the clearest heads with hardly an exception.

Since the rebel leader claimed, as we have seen, to be descended from Alí, Mohammed's son-in-law, we should naturally have expected to find him, like other Alids, appealing to the divine right of his house, and coming forward as founder of a sect of Shíites. But instead of this he declared himself for the doctrine of those most decided enemies of Shíite legitimism, the Kharijites or Zealots, who held the first two Caliphs alone to have been lawful, and rejected Othmán and Alí alike, because they had adopted worldly views; who demanded that none but "the best man" should wield the sovereignty, "though he were an Abyssinian slave;"¹ who, moreover, in their ethical rigorism regarded as idolatry every grave sin, and most of all, of course, opposition to their own doctrine as the true Islam; and who accordingly regarded all their Moslem enemies, with their wives and families, as lawfully given over to the sword or to slavery. One of the most prominent officers of the negro leader preached in this sense in Basra when it was taken; the same idea lent fury to his black troops; and even his banner bore the text of the Koran² which had been one of the chief watchwords of the old death-defying Kharijites. It was certainly also with a purpose that he called himself upon this banner simply, "Alí, son of Mohammed," without allusion to his high descent. With this it agrees that an original document of the period shortly after his death designates him as a Kharijite. His choice of party was in the highest degree

¹ See above, p. 80.

² "God has bought from the faithful their life and their goods with this price—that Paradise is to be their portion, and they are to fight, slay, and be slain in the path of God," and so on (súra 9, 112). In accordance with this word "bought," the Kharijites called themselves by preference "sellers" (*Shurát*); for heaven as their price they gave God their souls.

appropriate. The slaves were easily gained by a strong personality who could condescend to them, but they were not to be inspired with enthusiasm for a mystical hereditary claim. But that they themselves were the true believers and the lawful destroyers or masters of all others, the blacks were ready to believe; and they acted accordingly. Perhaps their leader took this also into account, that in Basra (on the lower classes of which place he seems at first to have reckoned), the Shíite doctrine was at that time very unpopular, quite the opposite of what it was in Cufa, the old rival of Basra. From what has been said it will be abundantly clear why Karmat, one of the founders of the Karmatians, an extreme Shíite sect which was destined soon after this to fill the whole Mohammedan world with fear and dismay, should, on religious grounds, have decided not to connect himself with the negro leader, however useful this association might otherwise have been to him.

The nature of the ground was highly favourable to a rising of the kind. Indeed, some forty years before this, in the marshes between Wásit and Basra, the Gypsies (Zutt) settled there had, augmented by offscourings of humanity brought together from all quarters, lived the life, first of robbers, and afterwards of declared rebels, and were only after the greatest exertion compelled to capitulate; yet these were people who neither in courage nor in numbers could be compared to the East Africans, and that, too, at a time when the caliphate was still in reality a world-empire.¹

Of the beginning of the negro insurrection we have exceptionally minute details from the accounts of eye-witnesses. We learn how one band of slaves after another

¹ An Arab rebel at that time mockingly said of Caliph Mámún that he was not able to catch "four hundred frogs" that were within arm's-length of him.

—a troop of fifty, a troop of five hundred, and so forth—obeyed the call of the new Messiah. We even know the names of those slaves who incited their companions to join the rebel leader. As was natural, their wrath was directed, not merely against their masters, who were mostly absent, but even more against the taskmasters, all of them, we may suppose, themselves slaves or at most freedmen. Yet the leader spared their lives and let them go, after they had first been soundly beaten by their former subordinates. The owners more than once begged him to let them have their slaves back again, promising him amnesty and five gold pieces per head; but he refused all offers; and when the blacks began to show uneasiness about such negotiations, he solemnly pledged himself never to betray them, and to further their best interests. This oath he kept.

The most numerous class of these negroes—the Zenj, properly so called—were almost all of them ignorant of Arabic; for during their common labours in the open air they had had no occasion to learn this language, though the Oriental black, for the most part, very readily drops his mother-tongue to take up that of his master. With these, accordingly, Alí had to use an interpreter. But others of the negroes—those from more northern countries (Nubia and the like)—already spoke Arabic. With the saltpetre workers were undoubtedly associated many fugitive slaves from the villages and towns, and probably all sorts of fair-skinned people as well, but apparently few representatives of the urban proletariat. A valuable accession to their strength was contributed by the black soldiers who, especially after defeats, went over to the Zenj from the government troops. So, for example, at the very outset a division of the army fell upon the almost unarmed rebels, but was beaten; whereupon three hundred blacks at once went over to the latter.

Unfortunately we possess practically no particulars as to the internal arrangements of this singular State, composed of fanatical warriors or robbers who once had been, for the most part, negro slaves. With regard to their great achievements in war, it is to be remembered that they were excellently led; that they fought upon a favourable and familiar soil, full of marshes and canals, of which they thoroughly knew how to take advantage, while the enemy was equipped for an altogether different kind of fighting; and, finally, that the East African blacks, as a rule, are brave. It was not without reason that many negroes were at that time enrolled in the troops of the empire; even at present the black regiments of the Khedive are much more serviceable than those raised in Egypt. We know, too, that the negro leader maintained strict discipline.

It would seem that he had exerted himself to win over the villagers also, who for the most part, if not altogether, were dependent on aristocratic or wealthy masters. Perhaps he was more successful in this than our authorities say. He sometimes gave up hostile villages to plunder; but the provisioning of his large masses of men was probably, to a considerable extent, made easier for him through the connivance of the peasants. And when, at the very outset, he allowed a band of Mecca pilgrims to pass unharmed, this action was not only sagacious, but also in accordance with the doctrine which he professed.

Hardly had the slaves' revolt declared itself when troops upon troops were sent for its suppression; but within a few weeks the Zenj had gained several victories. The imperial armies were, it may be presumed, not large enough, and were badly led; the enemy, as was natural, was underrated. Here, at the outset, we find the Zenj's peculiar mode of fighting,—namely, out of concealed side-channels, heavily overgrown with reeds, to fall suddenly upon the rear of the

enemy's troops as they rowed along. In this war it is the regular thing that a number of the vanquished are drowned. The leader of the Zenj was always well served by his scouts.

Of the booty taken in the first encounters, the most important part consisted of arms. Prisoners were remorselessly put to death. In fact, according to Kharijite doctrine, they were unbelievers, and worthy of death; while the women and the children, as non-Moslems, were made slaves. When at last the negro chief had defeated an army consisting principally of inhabitants of Basra, he marched in person against that town; he calculated, it would seem, that one of the two town parties, with which he had frequently had dealings, would declare itself for him; but in this he was deceived. The people, high and low, stood together. They faced him on Sunday, 23rd October 869 (full six weeks only after the date of his first rising), and completely shattered his army; he himself barely escaped death, fighting bravely. But the citizen-army, though it had manfully defended hearth and home, was hardly fit to take the offensive, and certainly had no leader who could be matched with Alí, who quickly rallied his followers. When, on the second day, the first division of the Basrans was advancing by water, bodies of Zenj posted in ambush on both sides of the canal fell upon their rear. Some vessels capsized. The negroes fought with fury; their women threw bricks. Those also who were advancing by land were involved in the disaster; many were killed or drowned. The defeat of the townspeople was complete. A large number of members of the ruling family even, descendants of Sulaimán,¹ the brother of the first two Abbásid Caliphs, perished. Alí caused a whole ship to be laden with heads of the slain and sent along a canal to Basra. His associates now urged him immediately to fall upon the town; but his reply was,

¹ See above, p. 116, note.

that they ought to be glad that they might now count upon peace for some time, so far as the Basrans were concerned. He had in the meanwhile no doubt satisfied himself that he had no substantial following in Basra, and still felt himself too weak to make himself master of the great city.

After these events the Zenj chief caused to be established, on a suitable dry spot, impregnated with salt and thus without vegetation, a settlement of his blacks, which he exchanged for another in the following year. His people reared huts of palm branches, we may suppose, or perhaps of mud. The "palaces" of the chief and of his principal officers, the prisons for the numerous captives, the mosques, and some other public buildings which were gradually added, may in some cases have been relatively handsome and internally adorned with the spoils of the enemy, but their material was certainly, at best, sun-dried brick. In the broader sense, the city finally founded, called Mokhtára ("the elect city"), covered a large area, and included extensive fields and palm groves. It lay somewhat below Basra, abutted on the west bank of the Tigris, and was intersected by the canal Nahr Abilkhasīb, the main direction of whose course was from north to south (or perhaps from north-east to south-west); other canals also surrounded, or, we may suppose, traversed it. With the complete change of the water-courses in that region, it is hardly likely that its site will ever be exactly made out.

The inhabitants of this ephemeral capital for the most part, doubtless, drew the necessities of life from the immediate neighbourhood. Yet they were also dependent to some extent on imports; so that in the end, when the blockade was fully established and all communications cut off, they were reduced to great extremity. Until then traders and Bedouins had ventured to bring provisions to the negro city even in full sight of the hostile army. The

dates grown there served, in part at least, as payment for the Bedouins. But as the home consumption of this chief article of produce hardly left much over for trade, we must assume that the dealers who thus risked their lives for the sake of gain must have been paid for the flour, fish, and other provisions which they brought with articles of plunder, and with money that had been accumulated by plunder and taxation, or rather black-mail.

At the pressing entreaty of the terrified Basrans the government sent the Turkish general Jolán. For six months he lay in camp face to face with the Zenj. His troops, consisting mostly of horsemen, could not move freely over the ground, thickly planted as it was with date-palms and other trees, and broken up by water-courses. At last a night attack by the negroes upon the entrenched camp made such an impression upon his soldiers, that Jolán judged it expedient to withdraw to Basra. Previously to this an attack of the Basrans had been victoriously repelled by the Zenj. The latter now grew so bold that they seized upon a fleet of twenty-four vessels bound for Basra; much blood was shed in this action, and the booty, including many captive women and children, was very great. On Wednesday, 19th June 870, they attacked the flourishing town of Obolla, which lay four hours from Basra, on the Tigris (approximately on the site of the modern Bussorah), and captured it after a brief struggle, in which the commandant fell along with his son. The slaughter was great: many were drowned; the city, built of wood, fell a prey to the flames. The fall of Obolla had such an effect upon the inhabitants of Abbádán, a town on an island at the mouth of the Tigris, that they made their submission to the Zenj; in doing so they had to deliver up their slaves and all their arms; the former augmenting the fighting strength of the victors. Hereupon the negro chief sent an army far into

Khúzistán (Susiana), the adjoining country on the east. Wherever submission was not made, fire and sword did their work. On Monday, 14th August, the capital Ahwáz (on the stream now known as the Kárún) was taken. The garrison of this important place had prudently withdrawn, and this doubtless secured for the inhabitants a milder treatment. But, of course, all the property of the government and of the governor, who with his people had remained at his post, was confiscated.

Thus, then, within less than a year an adventurer at the head of negro slaves had taken considerable cities, made himself master of the mouth of the Tigris, and gained control of wide territories. Even the disturbance to commerce was very serious. The communications of Bagdad, the world-city, were broken, and its victualling rendered a matter of difficulty. Basra trembled at the fate of Obolla. Matters certainly could never have gone quite so far, if in the meantime the greatest confusion had not prevailed at the then residence of the Caliph, Sámarrá (on the Tigris, some three days' journey above Bagdad). At the very time of the fall of Obolla the disputes of those in authority had led to the death, after less than a year's reign, of the pious Caliph Muhtadí, and the proclamation of his cousin Motamid as Caliph. But this was the beginning of an improved state of affairs. For though Motamid was not at all such a sovereign as the times demanded, yet his brother Mowaffak, who in reality held the reins of government, leaving to the Caliph only the honour and luxury of the exalted position, had intelligence and perseverance enough gradually to restore the power of the dynasty, in the central provinces at least. At first, indeed, he had too much on hand elsewhere to be able to think of the Zenj, but in the early summer of 871 he had got so far as to send against them an army under the command of his chamberlain Saíd. Saíd at first inflicted

serious losses on them, but in the end suffered a disastrous defeat through a night attack. He was recalled, but his successor fared no better. Five hundred heads of soldiers of his were exhibited in the immediate neighbourhood of Basra; many were drowned. In Susiana, too, a general of the blacks had fought with success, but their chief called him back to cut off the Basrans anew from communication with the Tigris, which had recently been reopened for them by the imperial troops. This done, the Zenj for some time pressed hard on Basra itself, which had but an inadequate garrison, was torn by party dissensions, and was suffering from dearth. The negroes were joined by a number of Bedouins. Great as is the contempt with which the genuine Arab regards the black, the prospect of plunder, and the plunder of so rich a town as Basra, is an attraction which the hungry son of the desert cannot resist. These Bedouins were not equal to the Zenj, either in bravery or in loyalty; but they were valuable to the chief, as supplying him with a body of cavalry. On the 7th September 871, during the Friday service, the negro general Mohallabí, with these Arab horsemen and with black foot soldiers, penetrated into the city, but retired once more, after setting fire to it in several places. It was not till Monday that the Zenj took full possession. The massacre that followed was frightful. It is even alleged that many inhabitants were induced, by offers of quarter, to gather together at certain places, where they could more easily be cut down. The chief had vowed direst vengeance on the city which had deceived his hopes. His general Alí, son of Abbán, had allowed a deputation from one of the parties of the town to approach his chief with prayers for quarter; but he would not admit them to his presence, and superseded the general by a less soft-hearted man. The brutal negro slaves waded in the blood of the free men. The lowest estimate places the number of the

slain in Basra at 300,000. The captured women and children were carried into slavery. The noblest women of the houses of Alí and of the reigning house of Abbás were sold to the highest bidder. Many negroes are said to have received as many as ten slaves, or more, for their share.

But a permanent occupation of the great city was not feasible. It was forthwith evacuated, and the army, which, immediately after the arrival of the shocking tidings, had been despatched from the capital, under Mowallad, against the Zenj, was able, in conjunction with the remains of the troops already in the district, to occupy Basra and Obolla without striking a blow. Many inhabitants who had been lucky enough to escape gathered together once more in Basra. But when Mowallad proceeded further against the Zenj, he was, like his predecessors, defeated in a night attack, and compelled to withdraw again to the neighbourhood of the town. In Susiana likewise the fortunes of war, after some fluctuations, proved favourable to the Zenj.

Mowaffak himself now advanced with a brilliant force to the neighbourhood of the negro city; but this also suffered defeat (29th April 872). The mortal wound of Moflih, the actual commander, seems to have thrown the soldiers into confusion at once. Mowaffak remained in the district of Obolla, keeping the Zenj steadily in his eye. In one of the battles of this period one of their best generals, Yahyá of Bahrein, was wounded and made prisoner. He was brought to Sámarrá, and there, in the brutal and cowardly fashion then customary in the treatment of prominent captive rebels, was led about on a camel for exhibition before being cruelly put to death in the presence of the Caliph.

After Mowaffak's troops had somewhat recovered from the severe sicknesses from which they had suffered in those hot marshy regions, and had repaired their equipment, he again marched against the enemy; but although he occasionally

gained some advantage and succeeded in rescuing captive women and children, he in the end sustained another reverse; and, to add to his misfortunes, his camp took fire and was burned. Towards the beginning of full summer, accordingly, he found himself compelled to quit the proper seat of war, and to withdraw to Wásit. His army melted away almost entirely, and he himself, in January 873, returned to Sámarrá, leaving Mowallad behind him in Wásit. The expedition on which such great hopes had been built had come to nothing; yet it had not been wholly vain, for Mowaffak had come to know the enemy more perfectly, and had seen more clearly how he was to be reached.

After the imperial army had left the field, the negro chief again sent considerable forces into Susiana, who, with some trouble, succeeded a second time in taking Ahwáz, the capital (beginning of May 873). Several prisoners of distinction, who had fallen into the hands of the victors there, had their lives spared by the chief, doubtless with a view to heavy ransoms. The expeditions of the Zenj into the neighbouring countries, be it noted, were designed less for the acquisition of permanent possessions than to procure food and booty, perhaps also to inspire terror in the enemy. The Zenj leader may sometimes have dreamt of conquests on the grand scale, but in the end he always recognised that he and his negroes were safe only among their marshes and ditches.

A new army, despatched from the capital, ultimately defeated the Zenj in Susiana, and drove them out of the country. Other armies pressed on them from other quarters, and sought to cut off their supplies. The principal leader in these enterprises was one of the most powerful men in the empire—Músá the Turk, son of Boghá, who had left Sámarrá in September 873. Still nothing decisive took place.

A considerable interval passes, during which we learn

nothing of the Zenj. Meanwhile, they were aided by a rising to which they had not contributed, and which had not them in view. For when a rebel, who had made himself master of Persia proper (Persis), had vanquished one of the subordinates of Músá, the latter found himself uncomfortable in Wásit, and begged to be relieved of his post (spring, 875). Provisionally, Mowaffak undertook, nominally at least, the government of Músá's provinces along with the war against the Zenj. The latter had meanwhile taken Ahwáz a third time, and had proved disastrous occupants. They had to be left alone, for now a quite new and very dangerous enemy made a diversion in their favour. Yakúb, son of Laith, the coppersmith (Saffár), who had conquered for himself a great empire in the East, aiming also at the possession of the central lands of the caliphate, forced his way through Persia and Susiana and advanced upon Bagdad. But between Wásit and the capital he was met by Mowaffak with the imperial army, and decisively defeated (April 876).¹

The Zenj, of course, took advantage of the withdrawal of troops from the lower Tigris, every available soldier being required against the coppersmith. They extended themselves farther to the north, where the Arab tribes who had their settlements in the marshy districts to the south of Wásit lent them a helping hand. Isolated efforts to drive them back had no result. The negro king now seriously exerted himself to become sovereign of Susiana. A Kurdish upstart, Mohammed, son of Obaidalláh, who, under Yakúb as his superior, had made himself master of part of that province, became his ally, but with no sincere intentions. The two armies parted, and consequently the Zenj were defeated by the imperial troops, especially as a number of Bedouins had gone over to the latter. The *Societas malorum* had not held good. Yet the government derived no sub-

¹ See below, p. 191.

stantial benefit; in the long-run the Zenj retained, even in these regions, the upper hand. All sorts of troubles, and, in particular, the threatening proximity of Yakúb, who would not be propitiated by Mowaffak, and who might break out again at any moment, sufficiently explain why nothing considerable was attempted against them. For the inhabitants of those countries this must have been a dreadful time. Yakúb peremptorily rejected the alliance tendered by the chief of the Zenj, yet, at last, without definite agreement, a truce was established between the two enemies of Mowaffak. But after Yakúb's death (4th June 879) the imperial regent quickly induced his successor, his brother Amr, to conclude a peace. Meanwhile, he made him very great concessions, in order that in his great expedition against the blacks his left flank and his rear might remain covered.

In 878 the Zenj succeeded in capturing Wásit and other cities of Babylonia; the customary atrocities were, of course, not wanting. But in the end not even Wásit was held; Mowaffak's lieutenant again forced the Zenj back to bounds. The latter continued to make plundering and devastating incursions; in 879 they ventured as far as Jarjaráyá, less than seventy miles below Bagdad, so that the terrified inhabitants of the country fled for refuge to the capital.

In Susiana, Tekín the general opposed the Zenj with vigour, and relieved the great city of Shúshter which they were besieging, but afterwards entered into negotiations with them. When these became known, one portion of his army went over to the enemy, another joined Mohammed, son of Obaidalláh. Such things throw a strange light upon the discipline and loyalty of the imperial army. After much fighting and conference the Kurdish Mohammed had at last to bring himself to recognise the supremacy of the negro chief, to surrender to him a part of his territory,

along with the important town of Rámhormuz, and to pay tribute; but even now he continued to act in a thoroughly untrustworthy manner, and caused all kinds of mischief to the Zenj.

In any case, the power of the Zenj was now (879) greater than ever. But it was at this point that the tide really began to turn. Mowaffak's position had gradually grown stronger, and the death of Yakúb had given him a free hand. He now no longer delayed to summon all his resources for making an end of the black robber-scurge. In doing so he proceeded with great deliberation and unwonted caution. He had learned wisdom at last, from many failures of the imperial troops, which, in part, had followed close on brilliant victories. He now knew that it was impossible to get at these amphibians in the same way as enemies on firm accessible soil are reached. His preparations for a decisive campaign against the Zenj would require to be of a quite peculiar character, and in the campaign itself it would be of supreme importance, along with bravery, to exercise all caution. A great general with similar resources at his command would certainly have annihilated the blacks much more quickly than Mowaffak did; the latter in the campaign plays the part rather of the prudent statesman who acts only with hesitation, does not place much at stake, and strives towards his end slowly, if surely.

The task of expelling the Zenj from the northern territories near Wásit was entrusted by Mowaffak, in the first instance, to his son Abul Abbás (afterwards Caliph Motadid), who was now but twenty-three years old. In November or December 879 the troops and ships of the latter were reviewed by his father near Bagdad. The fleet consisted of very diverse kinds of craft, but all of them rowing vessels. The largest served partly for transport, partly

as floating fortresses; a smaller kind, of which some are mentioned as carrying twenty, and others as carrying forty rowers, seem chiefly to have been used for attack. The young prince justified the confidence reposed in him. He gave battle repeatedly with success, and, though operations had often to be suspended, the Zenj were steadily compelled to give place. One of their captains was taken and pardoned; this is the first instance of the application of a new policy which was to gain over the officers and soldiers of the rebel. This course, more astute than heroic, had great success. In proportion as the situation of the negro chief grew serious, his subordinates were more ready to desert him, and, instead of continuing to endure the dangers and privations of a siege, to accept from Mowaffak amnesty, honours, rewards. Care was taken to make the deserters in their robes of honour conspicuous, so that the rebels might be able to see them. Their prince, of course, did all he could on the other side to check the falling away. Thus, we are told that he caused "the son of the king of the Zenj" to be put to death, because he had heard that he proposed to go over to the enemy. Of this real negro prince we would gladly know more. The prisoners taken by the imperial troops were, as a rule, killed. Abul Abbás distinguished himself personally by his bravery. In one of the battles twenty arrows were found sticking in the coat of felt which he wore over his breastplate. Almost a year passed before Mowaffak in person appeared with a great army on the scene (Tuesday, 11th October 880). The first result of consequence was the capture of the city of Maná, built by the Zenj not very far from Wásit, when five thousand captive women and children were restored to freedom. The liberation of great masses of women and children becomes an occurrence of increasing frequency as one place after another is taken from the possession of the

negroes. At every advance Mowaffak was very careful to secure his rearward communications, and to make it impossible for the blacks to attack him from behind. This rendered necessary, among other things, much river-engineering, making and breaking of dams. The regent thereupon again left the campaign for a time in the hands of his son, and marched towards Susiana (Friday, 6th January 881), to clear that portion of the empire. This was quickly done, and without much trouble, for the negro chief himself had given orders to evacuate the territory which was not to be definitively held, so as to concentrate his whole power. On their march back the Zenj continued to loot some villages, although these had made their submission to the chief. Several bands cut off from the main army asked and obtained pardon. That honest Kurd Mohammed naturally made his peace with Mowaffak without delay, and was received into favour. On Saturday, 18th February 881, Mowaffak again joined his son Abul Abbás and his other son Hárún, whom he had sent on before with his army from Wásit towards the south, and the united hosts advanced.

The negroes were now confined to their own proper territory in and around Mokhtára. Before the attack on this place began, Mowaffak sent once more a solemn summons to the rebel calling upon him to surrender, and promising him a full pardon if he obeyed. It need not be said that such a demand had no effect. Bad as the position of the Zenj chief was,—and it grew worse every day,—he could not stoop to become a pensioner of the Caliph. Moreover, it was at any moment possible that troubles in Bagdad or Sámarrá, or the appearance of some dangerous rebel in one of the provinces, might compel the persistent adversary to abandon the siege and all that he had gained. Some of his officers were less steadfast. The

desertion of these to the regent, who received them with open arms, began with his first approach, and went on repeating itself to the end of the bloody tragedy. Many soldiers also went over. Mowaffak so arranged that the negroes in his army tempted those of the enemy over to his side. All so inclined were forthwith enrolled in his ranks. Naturally, no one dreamed for a moment of considering the claims of their former masters upon these slaves. In this way the negro chief found many of his best forces gradually drawn away from himself and augmenting the strength of the enemy; this they did less by their direct fighting capacity than by their accurate acquaintance with the localities and with the whole condition of things. To the cause of the Zenj it was, moreover, highly prejudicial that their leader had to become ever more mistrustful of his subordinates. In fact, several of his best colleagues, in whom he had placed perfect confidence, abandoned him, though others held by him to the death. The amnesty was extended also to those Bedouins who should fall away from the Zenj. On the other hand, a leader of the negroes, who had been made a prisoner, when it was proved that he had treated women who had fallen into his hands with singular atrocity, was put to a painful death. In other cases also, cruel punishments were sometimes inflicted on prisoners.

The city of Mokhtára, the siege of which henceforward constitutes the whole war, was protected, not only by water-courses and dams, but also by a variety of fortifications properly so called. It even had catapults upon its walls. During the course of the long siege new defensive works of various kinds continued to be erected, and artificial inundations were also resorted to. Nor was there any lack of boats, and still less of men, though we may take it that the number of 300,000 fighting men claimed for the

negro leader is greatly exaggerated. The Zenj may very well have outnumbered their assailants, whose strength is given at 50,000, at least at the beginning of the struggle; but the latter were, on the whole, certainly much better equipped, better fed, and continually recruited by newly arriving troops. Mowaffak, however, had so little thought of taking Mokhtára by sudden attack, that in front of the place, though judiciously separated from it by the breadth of the river, he built for himself on the east bank of the Tigris a city - camp, which he named after himself Mowaffakíya. The matter of supreme importance was to cut off the supplies of the Zenj, and to secure his own. In Mowaffakíya a lively trade sprang up: he even caused money to be coined there. But the Zenj still showed themselves very troublesome enemies, and occasionally captured transports that had been destined for the imperial troops. It was not until a new fleet arrived from the Persian coast that intercourse with the outer world was made almost impossible for the negroes; and henceforward provisions could only be introduced occasionally and by stealth. For the Bedouins, who had still been venturesome enough to supply the Zenj with various kinds of food in exchange for dates, Mowaffak established an easy and safe market in Basra. Thus gradually the scarcity of food began to be keenly felt among the blacks, and the supply of bread virtually ceased. Nevertheless, they held out bravely; and in the numerous collisions which took place, as our authorities make plain, notwithstanding their highly official colouring, the imperialists had by no means always the best of it.

Towards the end of July 881¹ the troops succeeded in

¹ The very precise details of this war occasionally include notices of meteorological facts. In the beginning of December 880 the troops (in about 30° 30' N. lat. and near sea level) suffered in violent rain from bitter

forcing their way into Mokhtára, and had begun their work of destruction with fire and sword, but the same evening they again abandoned their capture. The same thing frequently recurred; moreover, the invading troops were more than once again driven out by the Zenj. At a comparatively late stage of the siege (end of 882) Mowaffak found himself under the necessity of again removing his base, which he had recently advanced to the western bank of the Tigris, back to the eastern, so troublesome had the Zenj proved themselves to be. The main action was, moreover, more than once interrupted; as, for example, from the end of summer 881 till October of that year. In their assaults on the town the besiegers specially directed their efforts to destruction of the defensive works, so that several approaches lay open in a way that did not admit of their being again closed; they also set themselves as much as possible to clear away the obstacles—bridges, dams, chains—which the besieged had introduced to prevent the entrance of great ships into the water-ways, and especially into the main canal—the Nahr Abilhasib. In these operations the tide proved sometimes a help, sometimes a hindrance; it frequently happened that the ebb would leave the vessels high and dry on the sand. As the opposing parties were often quite near one another, separated only, it might be, by narrow ditches, wounds were frequent. In addition to the ordinary weapons of war, molten lead was hurled against the foe. The besiegers had also with them “naphtha men,” who threw Greek fire at the Zenj or their works. Fireships were also sometimes used against the bridges. Occasionally the assailants made way far into the city; on Monday, 10th December 882, they in this manner destroyed the building which “the

cold. In December 883 so thick a fog prevailed that a man could hardly distinguish his neighbour in the ranks.

abominable ones called their mosque," but which the Faithful naturally regarded as nothing better than a synagogue of Satan. But in this particular attack Mowaffak himself was seriously wounded with an arrow, shot by a quondam Byzantine slave; and as he did not spare himself, his wound grew alarmingly worse. Operations were on this account suspended for a considerable time, and many became so filled with fear that they quitted Mowaffakíya. And in the meanwhile an untoward circumstance of another kind arose. The Caliph Motamid manifested an inclination to free himself from the tutelage of his brother, and (in the beginning of December 882) quitted Sámarrá, to take refuge with Ibn Túlún, the vassal prince of Egypt. But the governor of Bagdad, Ibn Kondáj, who held by Mowaffak, intercepted the Caliph and brought him back to the residency (middle of February 883). For this service Mowaffak loaded Ibn Kondáj with honours. The wretched Caliph had even to submit so far as to cause Ibn Túlún, whom he had just been regarding as his liberator, to be cursed from every pulpit as a rebel against the ordinance of God: nay, his own son, designated to be his successor (though afterwards compelled to surrender his right), had to be the first solemnly to pronounce this curse. We can easily understand how in these circumstances Mowaffak was pressingly urged to abandon his camp for a while and betake himself to the centre of the empire; but he continued steadfast in his task. What he had neither heroic courage nor brilliant generalship to achieve, he effected by caution and perseverance.

The Zenj leader utilised to the utmost the truce that had been thus forced upon his assailants, to place his defensive works in as complete repair as possible, or even to strengthen them still further. It is certain, too, that he was adequately informed by his spies and scouts as to

the seriousness of Mowaffak's then position, both personally and politically, and he may well have cherished new hopes; but in February 883 he was again sorely pressed: his own palace was plundered and burnt, and he himself exposed to great danger. In March and April the illness of Mowaffak rendered necessary another cessation of the attack, but from the end of April onwards the struggle was seldom intermitted for any time. The rebel chief transferred the centre of his defence from the west to the east side of the main canal, though without wholly abandoning the former.

The desertions of his officers went on increasing. It is alleged that even his own son opened negotiations with Mowaffak; these, however, we may conjecture to have been quite hollow. But, among others, Shibl, a former slave, one of his most prominent lieutenants, went over to Mowaffak, and allowed himself forthwith to be sent directly against his old comrades. To another of these people, Sharání, whose wicked deeds had been many, there was at first an inclination to refuse pardon; but, in order not to scare his accomplices, he too was at last accepted, and received a rich reward for his treachery. The official account gives us a touching scene, in which Mowaffak, shortly before the last decisive struggle, solemnly admonishes the deserters to make good their evil deeds by bravery and fidelity; and this, deeply moved, they promised to do.

In the actual encounters the Zenj still continued to show great courage. The imperialists were not now, it is true, invariably forced to give up again in the evening the ground they had gained during the day; yet even in the great battle of Tuesday, 21st May 883, in which the harem of the negro chief, with more than a hundred women and children, had been sacked, and Prince Abul Abbás, in his advance, had burned great stores of grain, the assailants found themselves at last so hard pressed by the blacks that Mowaffak judged

it advisable to withdraw them to his ships. He did not yet feel himself strong enough to deliver the mortal blow. But now new reinforcements were continually coming in, though indeed, for the most part, these did nothing more than repair the continual losses through battle and sickness. Among the new-comers were numerous volunteers, who, from religious motives, entered upon the holy war against the heretics. An event of very special importance was the separation from his master of Lúlú, the commander in Northern Syria of the forces of Ibn Túlún, the ruler of Egypt mentioned above; he entered into negotiations with Mowaffak, of which the result was that with a considerable army behind him he joined the latter on Thursday, 11th July 883. The preparations for a decisive assault were now complete; transport ships for large masses of troops were in immediate readiness, and the great waterways of the hostile territory were by this time so entirely free of all obstacles as to be passable at all states of the tide. Mowaffak is said to have brought more than 50,000 men into the great battle of Monday, 5th August, while yet leaving a large number behind in Mowaffakiya. After a severe struggle the whole city was taken. The negro chief fled; but as the imperialists, instead of pursuing him keenly, occupied themselves with plunder, and, by becoming scattered, exposed themselves to the danger of surprise, a withdrawal was again in the end found necessary, and Alí returned once more to the city. The respite, however, was but short. The final assault was delivered on Saturday, 11th August 883. From the first the advanced troops broke up the Zenj. Their leader was separated from his companions; Sulaimán, son of Jámi, along with others, was made prisoner. A section of the Zenj, indeed, drove back the enemy once more, but this was of no avail; in a little news was brought that the rebel chief was dead, and one of Lúlú's people almost immediately confirmed this intelli-

gence by bringing in his head. It is not certain how he met his death. Perhaps we may venture to believe a statement¹ that he poisoned himself. According to another story, he perished in flight. That he did not fall in battle is further indicated by the circumstance that none of our authorities, with all their fulness, speak of any combatant as having sought to obtain the royal reward for slaying the arch-rebel. Death by his own hand seems the most appropriate to the nature of the man; at the same time, I am free to confess that we can form a tolerably vivid picture of him only if we bring a good deal of fancy into play.

When Mowaffak saw the head of his enemy, he threw himself upon the ground in an attitude of worship, full of thankfulness to God. The example was followed by officers and troops. It would almost seem as if without the energy of Lúlú the mortal struggle of the Zenj might have been still further protracted. This is not indeed exactly what is said by the history, written as it is entirely in the government sense, but there is evidence for it in a couplet which the soldiers sang, to the effect that—

“ Beyond all doubt, say what you choose,
The victory was all Lúlú's.”²

On this and the following days some thousands of Zenj surrendered themselves, and were pardoned: it would have been a senseless thing to have driven the last remnants of the enemy to desperation, especially when they could be utilised as soldiers. Others, again, fared badly who had fled into the desert, some dying of thirst, and some being made slaves by the Bedouins. Yet a number of blacks still remained unsubdued, and from the swampy thickets to the

¹ By Hamza Isfahání (Leyden MS.; not in the printed text).

² Some years later Mowaffak caused Lúlú to be thrown into prison in order to obtain possession of his great wealth—wealth, we may be sure, which had not been quite innocently gained.

west of Basra, whither they had a considerable time before been sent by the negro chief, continued to carry on their robberies and murders. Mowaffak was on the point of sending a division against them, when they, too, made their submission.¹ When they showed themselves, their good condition struck the beholders; they had not gone through the hardships of the long siege.

The son of the rebel chief and five of his high commanders had fallen alive into the hands of the victors. They were kept in prison in Wásit, until one day the negroes there once more raised an insurrection, and by acclamation chose the first-named as their chief. The prisoners were then beheaded (885). The bowman who had hit Mowaffak was recognised far away from the seat of war at Rámhormuz in Susiana, and brought to Mowaffak, who handed him over to his son Abul Abbás to be put to death.

Mowaffak remained for a considerable time in the city he had founded, to bring matters into order. A general proclamation was issued, that all who had fled through fear of the Zenj should return to their homes. Many betook themselves to Mowaffakíya, but this city also had only an ephemeral existence; even the geographers of the following century no longer mention it. The great trading city of Basra, which once more rose to prosperity, proved too powerful a rival for its neighbour.

Abul Abbás arrived in Bagdad, the capital, with the head of the negro leader displayed on a pole, on Saturday, 23rd November 883.

Thus ended one of the bloodiest and most destructive rebellions which the history of Western Asia records. Its consequences must long have continued to be felt, and it

¹ The Zenj who were received into the service of the Caliph after the death of their leader are described in an original source, dating from the period of his successor, as pure barbarians, who spoke no Arabic, and ate carrion, and even human flesh.

can hardly be doubted that the cities and regions of the lower Tigris never entirely recovered from the injuries which they at that time suffered.

Several contemporaries, among them former adherents of Ali, wrote the story of this rebellion. Out of their writings, along with official documents, Tabarí, himself a contemporary, incorporated in his great Chronicle, a very comprehensive narrative, especially of the events of the war. The well-known book of Mas'údí supplies us with valuable additions to our information; did we possess his greater works also, we should doubtless know more as to the person of the negro chief and the institutions of his State. Other writers supply us only with incidental notices.